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Ikea traffic tops local worries

Pondering thousands of new homes and a possible big-box retailer in their neighborhood, South Loop residents

By LYDIALYLE GIBSON

Staff Writer

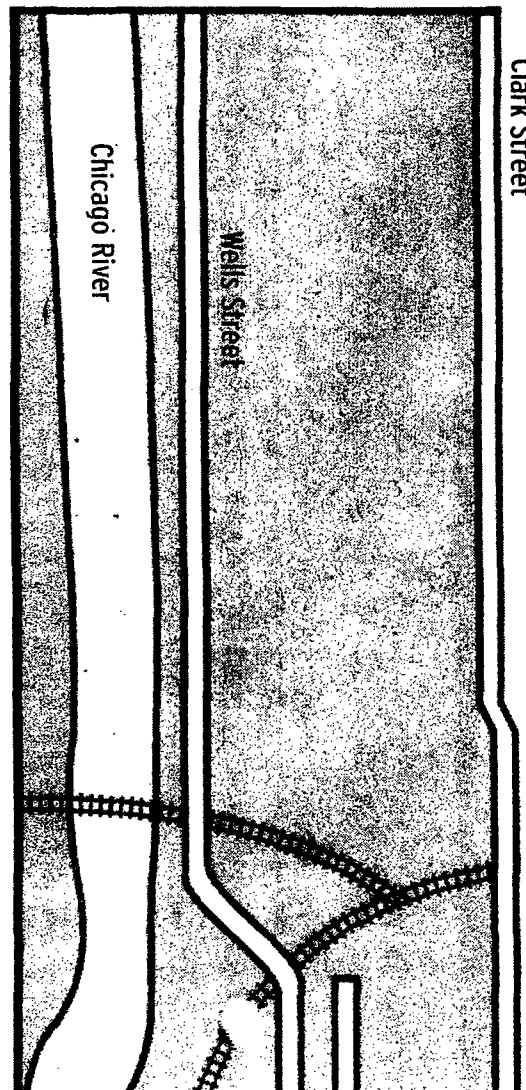
It didn't take long, last Wednesday inside Grace Place's window-walled confines, for the talk to turn to traffic. And Ikea.

Nearly 200 South Loopers packed the house that night in hopes of gaining a little insight into what's to become of 62 acres of wilderness and rail yard yawning southward from the corner of Clark and Roosevelt. After buying the property more than a year ago, officials at Rezmar Corp. last month handed City Hall higher-ups a plan for its development into a few thousand homes, a few dozen retailers, a riverwalk, an underground parking garage, a new street grid—and an Ikea. Appearing last week before members of Historic Printers' Row Neighbors and hoping to be digging holes by next spring, Rezmar executives were aiming for some constructive neighborhood reaction.

They got plenty of it.

While many in the crowd last Wednesday found much to praise in Rezmar's plan—the architecture, the riverwalk, the bounty of longed-for retail just on the other side of the Metra tracks—most everyone who spoke at last week's confab confessed to a little

Roosevelt Road



though, applauded Rezmar's traffic-easing efforts.

"The cars are buried, and I'm looking forward to being able to get to the riverwalk," Gordon said. "And if you get that kind of retail out here, that kind of development, this will be a real city."

Rezmar's kind of retail was the other main issue last Wednesday night. At the center of the plastic model on display at Grace Place perched a wide, square Ikea camouflaged on the south side by a few clinging vines of ivy and a row of attached loft units. The deal with the Swedish home furnisher's not done, according to Fishman, but some big-box retailer will occupy 300,000 square feet of the river-side property.

"I feel like we'll be the sacrificial lambs," one resident complained. "Hell hath no fury like somebody trying to get to Ikea."

Just to the north, stretching southward from Roosevelt along LaSalle, Rezmar officials plan to build another 250,000 square feet of storefront retail—clothing stores, furniture stores, books, florists. A row of restaurants would abut the riverwalk.

"We want to provide for the South Loop kind of city center, like they have all over the North Side," Fishman said. "Destina-

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They got plenty of it.

While many in the crowd last Wednesday found much to praise in Rezmar's plan—the architecture, the riverwalk, the bounty of longed-for retail just on the other side of the Metra tracks—most everyone who spoke at last week's confab confessed to a little traffic-related skepticism. Did Rezmar's traffic studies take into account the Target already underway just north of Roosevelt? What about public transportation? Would residents along Wells have to endure to their street becoming a truck route?

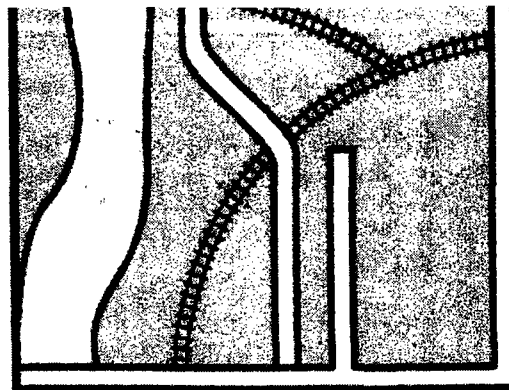
Bringing with her a veritable armada of traffic experts, consultants, and architects, Rezmar Vice President and Senior Project Manager Judi Fishman sought to ease neighborhood worries, as well as offer a little elucidation. Rezmar officials had done their best, she said, to navigate the site's myriad railroad tracks and create multiple ways in and out of the site. Rezmar officials, Fishman said, had buried the three-level parking garage beneath 250,000 square-feet of shops. They'd designed a promenade they hoped would invite pedestrians.

"There's no question that doing a project of this magnitude will create additional traffic," Fishman said. "No one's going to stand up here and say there's not traffic increase. You have amenities, and this is a balance. From the studies, it appears that traffic will move."

Still, many remained unconvinced.

"Tell me that on a Bears game day," one man called out. "Tell me that on Roosevelt Road at rush hour. Not going to happen."

Jena Doolas, who's lived at Polk and Wells for 11 years said she didn't plan to shop much at the proposed Ikea or Rezmar's



18th Street

Illustration by Cindy Michalowski

Hoping to give their development more access to the rest of the neighborhood, Rezmar officials will carry Wells Street through the site. 13th Street will stretch all the way to Clark. Other east- and westbound streets, though, remain hemmed by railroad tracks.

A smattering of applause followed.

HPRN officials, too, said they'd like to see more east- and westbound streets reaching Clark from Rezmar's property. As planned, only Roosevelt and 13th cross out of the site.

"We have asked Rezmar to add at least a pedestrian and bicycle underpass at about 15th Street," HPRN Board Member Leslie Sturino said by e-mail after the meeting. "This is our top priority, especially since the Clark St. thoroughway will further divide our South Loop neighborhoods."

Meanwhile, Wells Street residents protested the idea of their front doors someday soon looking out onto a truck route.

"What about people living on Wells?" one local asked upon hearing about Rezmar's plans to extend the two-lane street southward through the length of the development and connect it to Wentworth. As one of the few north-south arteries stretching beyond Rezmar's project, a lengthened Wells would attract more freight traffic.

Clark Street's through traffic beneath Roosevelt Road would ease the logjam of idling engines, he said, as would Wells' connection to 18th Street to the south.

"We're hoping to shift some Roosevelt Road traffic to 18th," Grabowski said.

"Not every truck is going to be coming in on Wells," he said. "They'll come in on Clark because of the grade separation. I don't believe every truck that needs to get to this site is going to come that way," Grabowski said. "I don't want to say there'll be no trucks. ... It will be a truck route, but I don't think it will be *the* truck route."

Citing Daniel Burnham's 1909 plan for Chicago, one meeting-goer urged Rezmar officials to reconfigure Wells Street like Wacker Drive, with an upper and lower level.

"What I see here is Wells Street at one level, with buses and trucks as well as automobiles and pedestrians—what are you thinking?" he said. "What I'm seeing here is the Loop back in

and another 250,000 square feet of storefront retail—clothing stores, furniture stores, books, florists. A row of restaurants would abut the riverwalk.

"We want to provide for the South Loop, a kind of city center, like they have all over the North Side," Fishman said. "Destination restaurants, greenspace, dog parks. The retail center will be built on top of the parking garage. ... Clothing, furniture, like you see on North Avenue and Michigan Avenue."

After last week's confab, Sturino praised Rezmar's openness to neighborhood opinion—as well as the prosperity its development promises—but said she wasn't sure an Ikea, even a scaled-back one, wouldn't overtax the site's infrastructure.

"We would like to learn more about Rezmar's traffic projections and the specifics of IKEA's urban concept," Sturino said by e-mail.

More than one meeting-goer balked at the idea of recreating North and Clybourn at Roosevelt and Clark. They wouldn't mind the shops, they said, but they don't want the traffic.

"You're not the only one saying that," Fishman assured them. "The city said that, the planning department said that, CDOT said that. The problem is that on North Avenue, you have numerous curb cuts, pinch points at bridges, people moving cars from lot to lot when they shop. Here, there are no curb cuts. You park once and go from store to store."

Noting North Avenue's gradual accumulation of storefronts and motorized shoppers, Grabowski said Rezmar officials have the chance to nip North Avenue traffic in the bud in the South Loop.

"I mean, it's a daily struggle

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stand up here and say there's not traffic increase. You have amenities, and this is a balance. From the studies, it appears that traffic will move."

Still, many remained unconvinced.

"Tell me that on a Bears game day," one man called out. "Tell me that on Roosevelt Road at rush hour. Not going to happen."

Jena Doolas, who's lived at Polk and Wells for 11 years said she didn't plan to shop much at the proposed Ikea—or Rezmar's other storefronts—and she wasn't looking forward to the droves of people who would.

"I feel like my lifestyle is threatened," Doolas told Fishman last Wednesday. Pointing to a six-foot model of the development occupying the south end of the room, she said, "This is great. But I didn't move to Schaumburg. I didn't move to Oak Brook."

Meanwhile, Wells Street residents protested the idea of their front doors someday soon looking out onto a truck route.

"What about people living on Wells?" one local asked upon hearing about Rezmar's plans to extend the two-lane street southward through the length of the development and connect it to Wentworth. As one of the few north-south arteries stretching beyond Rezmar's project, a lengthened Wells would attract more freight traffic.

"You can't have two SUVs going opposite directions on Wells right now," someone chimed in. "How will have buses and trucks? It's going to take three hours to go three blocks."

Don Grabowski, deputy commissioner for the bureau of traffic in the city's Department of Transportation, sought to unruffle a few feathers. Plans to bury

trucks. ... It will be a truck route, but I don't think it will be the truck route."

Citing Daniel Burnham's 1909 plan for Chicago, one meeting-goer urged Rezmar officials to reconfigure Wells Street like Wacker Drive, with an upper and lower level.

"What I see here is Wells Street at one level, with buses and trucks as well as automobiles and pedestrians—what are you thinking" he said. "What I'm seeing here is the Loop back in 1909."

Grabowski lamented there'd be no money for a venture to divide Wells.

"The reality is, we just did Wacker Drive, did half of it, and the figure was, what, \$100 million, \$120 million?" Grabowski said. "You may want it, but somebody has to pay for it."

Architect Bob Gordon,

said that the problem is that on North Avenue, you have numerous curb cuts, pinch points at bridges, people moving cars from lot to lot when they shop. Here, there are no curb cuts. You park once and go from store to store."

Noting North Avenue's gradual accumulation of storefronts and motorized shoppers, Grabowski said Rezmar officials have the chance to nip North Avenue's traffic in the bud in the South Loop.

"I mean, it's a daily struggle for people in my office to deal with what happens on North Avenue," Grabowski said.

One plaintive voice rose from the back of the room: "Is it enough, what you've done for the traffic? People have to know traffic comes with these stores."

"We've done the best we can," Fishman said. "We did studies; we looked at this."

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